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COOPERATION IN THE FIELD OF ENVIRONMENT AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

(Commission decision G (50))

Report by the Executive Secretary

1. The Third Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" held in Sofia (Bulgaria) on 23-25 October 1995, was a major event in the ECE activities in the field of the environment. As a forum responsible for overseeing the development of the "Environment for Europe" process, the ECE Working Group of Senior Governmental Officials coordinated the preparations for the Conference including drafting of the Ministerial Declaration. The Conference focused on measures for the improvement of environmental conditions in countries in transition particularly environmental financing, and on harmonization and convergence of environmental policies in the entire ECE region including policies for the involvement of business and industry in securing environmentally sustainable economic development, conservation of biological and landscape diversity, and public participation in environmental decision-making (paragraph 3 of decision G (50)).

2. The Ministers of Environment from 49 ECE member countries and the Representative of the European Commission endorsed the Environmental Programme for Europe (EPE) which highlighted a number of long-term environmental priorities at a pan-European level and invited the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy (CEP) to screen the Programme in order to make proposals for action. They also endorsed the ECE Guidelines on Access to Environmental

Information and Public Participation in Environmental Decision-Making and envisaged the development of a regional legally-binding instrument (convention) on the matter. The Conference welcomed the recommendations of the ECE Integrated Report on Environmental Financing and supported initiatives of bilateral donors and international financing institutions to follow-up these recommendations. The Ministers at Sofia called for strengthening implementation and compliance with the ECE environmental conventions. Reconfirming the importance of the "Environment for Europe" process as a political framework for cooperation in the field of environmental protection in Europe, and of the role of ECE in overseeing the process in close cooperation with relevant agencies, the Sofia Conference invited the ECE Committee on Environmental Policy to ensure the substantive preparations for the next Ministerial Conference to be held in Denmark in May 1998 (paragraph 3 of decision G (50)).

3. The Committee on Environmental Policy at its special session (17 January 1996) established an Ad Hoc Working Group of Senior Officials "Environment for Europe" and adopted its mandate. It established an executive committee which will constitute the bureau of the Ad Hoc Working Group. The Committee decided also on beginning negotiations on a draft convention on access to environmental information and public participation in environmental decision-making. The mandate of the working group established by the Committee for this purpose envisages the submission of a draft convention to the Fourth Ministerial Conference in Denmark, for signature. Arrangements were made for the involvement of environmental non-governmental organizations in the negotiations. The Committee prepared a draft decision on the third Ministerial Conference "Environment for Europe" for consideration by the Commission at its fifty-first session (ECE/CEP/18) (paragraph 3 of decision G (50)).

4. The ECE/CEP made significant progress in 1995 in the extension to the entire ECE region of the system of national environmental performance reviews, originally developed by the OECD for its member countries. The ECE secretariat actively participated in the pilot review of Bulgaria conducted by the OECD. Moreover, the first pilot ECE review on Estonia was finalized. The 150-page review report, prepared by experts from five examining countries (Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany and Ukraine) and the ECE secretariat, evaluates how environmental and economic policies are integrated in the process of Estonia's transition from centrally planned to a market economy accompanied by specific difficulties arising from the entire transformation of the national legal and institutional systems after the regaining of State independence in 1991. A request was issued to interested countries regarding contributions in support of the respective ECE work. Nine countries responded favourably to the request, so that the Estonian review, as well as preparatory work for further reviews, could evolve smoothly. Slovenia was selected as the next country to be reviewed. Following the decision of the Sofia Ministerial Conference urging ECE to extend the environmental performance review system to the entire ECE region, the Executive Secretary pooled the necessary secretariat resources in a Team for Environmental Performance Reviews and Environmental Data Services. The team is rapidly developing its work schedule in full coordination with the OECD Secretariat (paragraph 4 of decision G (50)).

5. Increased efforts were made to contribute substantially to the preparations for the ECE Regional Conference on Transport and the Environment. In the preparations of a second step to the NO_x Protocol the contribution of the transport section to the achievement of critical loads and levels in Europe is being addressed. That sector contributes to acidification, eutrophication and ozone formation, thereby causing serious damage to environment, materials and human health. The Task Force on Integrated Assessment Modelling under the Convention will review the study for the purpose of developing it to include scenario analysis as a basis for negotiations. It is envisaged that the Task Force and PrepCom for the above Conference will cooperate in this respect and that the Conference may give strong political support for necessary regulatory action within the framework of the Convention (paragraph 6 of decision G (50)).

6. Some important steps were taken in preparing for the implementation of the three new environmental conventions in a transboundary context on water management; environmental impact assessment and industrial accidents pending their entry into force. Under these conventions networking was improved; assistance to countries in transition strengthened; regional centres for training, capacity building and promotion of the respective conventions set up and/or further developed; and steps taken to prepare the first Conferences of the Parties from the technical, logistic, substantive and procedural point of view. From progress made in the national ratification processes, it can be expected that the Convention on the Protection and Use of Transboundary Waters and International Lakes and the Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context will enter into force this year. The Convention on Transboundary Effects of Industrial Accidents is expected to enter into force thereafter (paragraph 7 of decision G (50)).

7. Under the Convention on Long-range Transboundary Air Pollution, which now has 40 Parties, the Executive Body decided to initiate negotiations on three protocols:

(a) Second step to the NO_x Protocol, using a multi-pollutant approach, and addressing photochemical pollution, acidification and eutrophication;

(b) Heavy metals;

(c) Persistent Organic Pollutants.

The major reviews of Strategies and Policies for Air Pollution Abatement, released in 1995, concludes that all Parties to the 1985 Helsinki Protocol on the Reduction of Sulphur Emissions or their Transboundary Fluxes by at least 30%, had successfully met their obligations by the target year 1993. Regarding the 1988 Sofia Protocol concerning the Control of Emissions of Nitrogen Oxides or their Transboundary Fluxes, having 1994 as target year, it is concluded that eighteen of the 25 Parties to the Protocol had already in 1993 met their obligations of stabilizing their emissions at the 1987 level. It is also concluded that the requirement of making unleaded fuel available throughout the ECE region is largely fulfilled. The 1991 Geneva Protocol concerning the Control of Emissions of Volatile Organic Compounds or their

Transboundary Fluxes, signed by 23 Parties, has been ratified by thirteen. It is expected to enter into force in 1996. The 1994 Oslo Protocol on Further Reduction of Sulphur Emissions, signed by 28 Parties, has been ratified by three (paragraphs 7-8 of decision G (50)).

8. The Preparatory work, carried out under the Convention, on persistent organic pollutants has been recognized by UNEP Governing Council as a stepping stone for possible global action on those substances. The ECE secretariat participates in the work for such possible action, with the aim of promoting a parallel approach for global and regional measures. With regard to air pollution in general, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has invited ECE to provide information and expertise for the preparation of international cooperation in the ESCAP region.